

### Chapter 841 All Dwarves Must Die

The fifth variant beast rider neural interface. In his fifth design, Ves chose not to do anything crazy. Instead of pursuing an extreme, he deliberately held himself back and opted to achieve a middle point in every possible parameter he could think of. Sitting in between the first and second variant, theoretically it had the highest chance of success!

"Prepare the seventeenth dwarf captive."

Eleven out of sixteen dwarf captives already sacrificed their lives for science today.

If these experiments happened in civilized space, the MTA would have already shut it down and investigate his scientific rigor.

The main reason why so many dwarves died was because he only vaguely knew what he was doing. He understood so little in the field of neural interface technology, yet progressed immediately to live testing. Such a decision was irresponsible to the extreme.

Even if only a single human test subject died or sustained serious injuries, the MTA would have come down on him like a stack of bricks. He'd lose his mech designer qualifications and be put into prison for a very long time.

"Luckily we're not in civilized space right now." Ves chuckled.

Ordinary high-gravity variant humans enjoyed actual human rights. No matter if their genes had been messed around in a way that diminished their intelligence, nobody dared to go too far. Therefore, as dimwitted as the dwarves in human space turned out to be, they still deserved to be treated with the dignity enjoyed by the rest of humanity.

In fact, the dwarves in human space occasionally produced mech pilots and geniuses who constantly fought for the rights of their variant race as well.

If these interest groups knew that Ves and the beast rider project treated the native dwarves like lab rats, they'd probably send assassins after him or something. Very likely though, the MTA would have already taken him into custody before they gave the orders.

The wildlings were different from their more civilized dwarf cousins though. They behaved savagely and violently, lived in the wild, wore beast hides as clothing and their most sophisticated technology was learning how to grind down godling bones into clubs and axes.

That made it easy to treat them as lessers. Although a small amount of experts among the Vandals and the beast rider project used to protest the abject treatment of the dwarves, Ves had long ago kicked them out of the team and replaced them with more like-minded people.

At this stage, they couldn't afford to care for the rights of the wildlings.

The stinking dwarves probably wouldn't have appreciated them anyway in their ignorance.

After a couple of minutes, the technicians strapped the seventeenth dwarf captive into the restraints. Once they finished the final checks, the commenced the seventeenth test.

"Begin!"

The connection between the fifth variant neural interface and the latest test subject engaged smoothly. From the telemetry displayed on the control panels, Ves vaguely judged it to be sufficiently stable. Enough data flowed through the connection without overstraining the test subject's nerves.

After that, the neural interface reached out to the organic antenna hidden inside the captive wild god's head. This end of the connection took a little more time to establish, and Ves already figured out some ways to improve it based on the prior experiments.

"The man-beast connection is forming! It's stable so far!"

"The test subject's heart rate is elevating!"

"A large amount of data is being exchanged through the man-beast connection. It is well within safety limits!"

All the sensors and monitors embedded into the bodies of the test subject and the wild god indicated that they hadn't suffered any ill effects so far. While some signs looked a little concerning, it did not lead to any serious adverse effects.

"The interfacing is a success! A stable connection has formed!"

This time, the experts cheered and celebrated a little. After going through fifteen outright failures and one coincidental fluke, the seventeenth test showed that the beast rider project still managed to succeed!

Of course, just like the sixteenth test, the seventeenth test could have been a fluke as well.

After one hour of continuous operation where they instructed the test subject to convey several commands to the wild god to test out the fidelity of the connection, they ended the test and brought the dwarf away for a complete checkup.

A long time had passed as they went through a raft of testing, so the beast rider project called it a night. The downtime also allowed them to sedate the wild god and make sure its restraints still held.

The next day, they resumed the testing with the fifth variant neural interface.

The eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth test subjects all survived. Nothing too strange went on when they interfaced with the wild god for at least an hour. Still, some signs of incompatibility emerged that mildly concerned Ves. It

showed that the fifth variant wasn't all that perfect, and wouldn't be able to hold up during an intensive battle when the exchange of data spiked.

Still, the beast rider project gathered an enormous amount of relevant data, which included both successful and unsuccessful attempts. Comparing the two and figuring out the differences enabled Ves to design a better and safer neural interface for the final project.

"Sir, nine out of twenty dwarf captives are still alive." Their resident exobiologist said. "What do you want to do with them? Should we take them away and save them for the next tests?"

Ves shook his head. "Since we already set things up here, it's a waste if we end the session now. Let's push the envelope and gather more data. As far as I'm concerned, the session isn't done until all the dwarves are dead."

"Sir, I suggest we save the dwarves for later." A doctor cautioned. "Performing brain surgery on them to disable their organic neural interface brain structures is rather difficult, and we don't have a qualified brain surgeon on staff."

The Vandals and the Swordmaidens for that matter had some doctors on their staff, but they weren't the cream of the crop. While they possessed their own specialties, whenever someone's brains needed to be operated, they depended on autosurgeon machines or special surgeon bots.

While these autosurgeon machines could easily perform millions of standard operations, they weren't too bright when it came to performing surgery that hadn't been included in their medical databases.

Operating the native wildlings introduced a further complication in that their brain structure was so far removed from the baseline human norm that they might as well be aliens. In such a case, the inflexible autosurgeons didn't possess the creativity to develop a customized treatment.

Therefore, the survival rate of the dwarves undergoing hours-long brain surgery was actually an abysmal twenty percent. This was also why it took a while to get twenty surviving test subjects. Throwing away their lives so casually would only delay their subsequent experiments.

Ves was well aware of this consideration, but he valued the opportunity to gather more data. He wanted to change some variables he hadn't played around with yet and see what would happen. How far could he push it before the change resulted in an adverse outcome?

"Performing the tests now will save us from performing them later." He said. "Time isn't on our side and I'd like our beast rider project to present its final results within the next couple of days. Captain Byrd and the rest are waiting for us to deliver a viable beast rider neural interface."

With that reminder, the experts resumed the testing with the lucky survivors. Ves climbed up to the back of the wild god and modified a key parameter of the fifth variant.

He then had the men send out the first dwarf captive who escaped death and strap him to the restraints.

Several hours went by as the second battery of tests pushed the initial dwarf survivors to their physical and mental limits.

Whenever a test subject survived for ten straight minutes, Ves halted the test and adjusted the settings of the fifth variant neural interface.

He dialed the settings to extremes until the test subject finally felt pain.

Then he dialed them up to eleven and watched with interest as the test subject finally became brain dead or suffered a heart attack.

By the time the nine dwarf survivors all succumbed to the cruel experiments, Ves became disappointed that he hadn't managed to induce a physical head

explosion. He was so fascinated by that outcome, but he still didn't know how something ludicrous like that could happen.

It wasn't as if surgeons buried explosives inside the heads of the dwarves!

"Alright, good work everyone. You all know what to do, so go and analyze the results so I can use them to design the final product."

Everyone dispersed with a fresh batch of data in hand. Each of them learned a lot of new things. The live testing provided them with a lot of material that could be used as evidence to prove or disprove a lot of theories.

Before they performed the tests, the experts could only guess at certain matters or make predictions on papers. Now, with solid data in hand, they held much more confidence in what they knew.

The experts processed the harvested data and used the results to develop a better neural interface. Ves did so as well and incorporated all of the lessons they learned into developing a safer, more effective neural interface specialized for beast riders.

Overall, Ves took the fifth variant as the starting point and mainly adjusted its hardware components. While he also touched upon its software, Ves knew that reckless changes in this area might lead to explosive results, as the third variant already attested!

"What the tests involving the third variant has taught me is that I don't know jack about programming a neural interface." Ves muttered to himself. "Still, I think I'll save this code. It might come in handy at some point."

Even though he started as a novice in the field of neural interface technology, all of the trial and error the beast rider project engaged in significantly progressed his understanding. Though he hadn't received any systematic knowledge that enabled him to become an authority concerning neural interfaces, he had made some incidental progress at the very least.

He became much more aware of how neural interfaces posed a threat to their mech pilots when configured incorrectly, and became more perceptive to flaws and deliberate sabotage that might lead to serious harm.

It reminded him how much danger the mech pilots exposed themselves to when they piloted a mech. Not only did they have to defend themselves against attacks from enemy mechs, they also have to be wary about the reliability of their own mechs!

"Piloting a mech is much more profound than piloting a shuttle or letting yourself be flown around by an aircar. The latter vehicles are simple and aren't expected to perform any complicated maneuvers, but the complexity of a mech exceeds the complexity of the human body. Neural interfaces are necessary if you want a single person to be able to control a mech down to the finest details."

The risks were great but the results more than compensated for it. Still, if mech designers really wanted to, they could have developed alternative means of controlling a mech.

Now that he thought about it, Ves himself possessed enough knowledge and experience to design a mech that could be piloted by a norm or even himself!

"It just won't be good enough for the battlefields of today." Ves shook his head. "Fielding neutered mech that relies on indirect control methods and heavy AI assistance is no different from fielding a mech-sized battle bot. There's no point in adding a human element to the equation."

Battle bots always existed, but their effectiveness always left a lot to be desired. Not only that, they were susceptible to hacking, sabotage and electronic interference.

Yet would this always remain true? Technology constantly progressed, and researchers constantly sought to find a way to develop effective battle bots that could completely replace the need to risk human lives.

Though this goal was noble, Ves didn't know what to make of it. If battle bots became completely viable one day, his job became obsolete. Perhaps other mech designers might be able to shift their careers to developing battle bots, but what about him? His design philosophy was intricately connected to both the mech and mech pilot. He really couldn't do without the latter.

"Mechs have to stay ahead of the curve. The human element should continue to bring benefits."

#### **Chapter 842 Unspent Currency**

Ves and the beast rider project returned to the sedated wild god the Flagrant Swordmaidens captured a while ago. Everything had been left behind, including the portable labs and the various sensors and monitors inserted into the wild god's flesh. Therefore, the experts quickly set things up with hardly any waste of time.

Everyone wanted to see another success!

For this final testing session, Ves didn't plan to waste too much time. After using the results of the previous testing session to develop a sixth variant beast rider neural interface, he only wanted to see whether it was safe to use.

In this short amount of time, the Vandals selected a bunch of strong dwarf warriors from the large wildling tribe they previously gassed and corralled into makeshift internment camps. Doctors performed surgery on them, but many of them suffered from complications and died.

In the end, the beast rider project only received five surviving dwarf captives to use as their test subjects for this session.



"Five dwarves are enough." Ves nodded. "Unless something horribly goes wrong, there shouldn't be any major swings in the sensor readings. No matter what kind of test subject we employ, the neural interface automatically adjusts to their individual traits."

This was a fairly advanced procedure involving some original software. Ves only touched upon this function lightly as he was afraid he could cause someone's head to explode if he let go of his restraints.

"Sir, the first dwarf captive is strapped and ready to go."

"Alright, commence the first test of the sixth variant."

The sixth variant beast rider neural interface was the culmination of all of their hard work. Based off the stable fifth variant, it incorporated elements of all the other variants, but to a tiny degree.

It squarely sat in the middle ground as far as Ves was concerned. Although holding the middle ground likely didn't lead to any spectacular results, it came with the advantage of maintaining a near-optimal balance between power and stability.

It was like baking the perfect cake after five different tries. After learning his lessons from his previous five attempts, his sixth attempt should be good enough to satisfy anyone's taste buds!

The first test proceeded without any substantial differences compared to tests involving the fifth variant. Ves expected nothing less as the final neural interface shared the same roots.

The second, third, fourth and fifth tests all proceeded slowly through hour-long tests. They didn't let the dwarf captives open a connection and do nothing. Instead, they put the dwarf to its paces, and monitored every scrap of data flowing in either direction.

"The initial tests have finished, sir." An expert reported after completing the fifth test. The older researcher looked at Ves with great respect. His achievements and his involvement in the project contributed greatly to its eventual success. "What do you wish to do with the dwarves? All of them have survived."

Ves thought over it for a moment. "I don't plan to perform any future sessions. I think the sixth variant is stable enough to be employed by our candidate beast riders. Still, it's a waste to keep the dwarves alive. Releasing them back to their tribe didn't give the Flagrant Swordmaidens any benefits.

Since they still had some test subjects on hand, the beast rider project might as well use them all up. "Let's test out some extreme conditions and see how much the dwarves can take it. We can simulate the results of battle damage in this way."

Dwarves that continued to live through the tests was like unspent money to Ves. Money by itself had little practical use. What made money truly valuable was what they could be exchanged for. Considering that Ves had no more use of this living currency, he might as well spend them in a rush to gather some final data.

Ves proceeded to tamper with the sixth variant neural interface in various ways to simulate battle damage.

In one instance, a vital subcomponent got disconnected, causing the neural interface's functioning to partially malfunction.

In another instance, he borked the neural interface's connectors, causing it to transmit half as much data as before.

In a final instance, Ves tampered with the programming by inserting the same lines of code used by the third neural interface.

He wanted to see if he could get a dwarf's head to explode again.

"The test subject's vital signs are fluctuating!"

"Pressure is building up in the test subject's heart and brains!"

The final dwarf left alive finally joined his fallen comrades as he puked up his lungs and bits and pieces of his internal organs.

He died with his head left intact.

"Damn. His head didn't explode." Ves cursed. "Well, it was a longshot anyway. The sixth variant is too stable compared to the third variant."

In any case, Ves felt more than satisfied with their progress. They wrapped up their equipment and cleaned up the testing site.

"What about the wild god? Do we release it back into the wild?"

Ves looked at the sedated wild god. All the while, it acted as a good prop for their experiments. Maybe it deserved a favor.

Then his stomach roiled a bit. "I think I'm in the mood for some god meat hamburgers. Let's ask the cooks to butcher it for its meat. All the Vandals and Swordmaidens are still craving for god meat, right? And I'm sure that we can feed a bunch of it to Qilanxo as well."

"If you say so."

According to the exobiologists, the god species sometimes exhibited cannibalism. The wild gods derived an amazing amount of benefits from eating the flesh from a sacred god. They grew enormously in strength for some reason and became incredibly formidable, to the point that the blessed people called them by various names such as ascendant gods or god eaters.

On the other hand, sacred gods didn't derive much benefits from eating wild gods. Their flesh was of much worse quality, and the sacred gods had little use for the intermediate energy and matter running through wild god meat.

Nonetheless, eating any god meat was a treat to the men.

In the following day, Ves made some final adjustments to the sixth variant neural interface. He incorporated the final bits of lessons and insights learned in the last testing session and shaped the sixth variant closer to perfection.

Eventually, he finished fabricating the final product according to the latest iteration of the design.

The experts of the beast rider project surrounded the neural interface components with reverence. They spent so much time on aiding the development of this fairly compact but significant piece of equipment.

"We have completed something that the galaxy has likely never seen before." Ves stated solemnly. "While we still need to engage in one more test to see if the neural interface works with our candidate beast riders, it is amazing what we have achieved so far from scratch."

"Most of the credit belongs to you, Mr. Larkinson!"

Ves earned the respect of most of the experts that aided him in his research. All of them contributed bits and pieces here and there, but Ves played the leading role in this research project.

From the start, many experts in fact didn't think they could produce something as ludicrous as a beast rider neural interface. All of them lacked the required expertise even if they combined all their knowledge.

Only Ves remained undaunted by the challenge. He persevered and made some extreme decisions that caused a lot of test subjects to die, but their sacrifices hadn't been in vain.

He managed to develop a working product in a reasonable timeframe under difficult field conditions!

"What we have accomplished is an advancement for all of humanity!"

Of course, the dwarves that laid down their lives so that a bunch of foreigners could play at becoming beast riders likely didn't agree. Nobody cared about their opinions, however. The Vandals dumped their remains into a pit and covered it up with soil.

Things moved quickly from then on. Just a half-day later, the experts set up a bunch of equipment around Qilanxo's form. They inserted her with a bunch of sensors and monitors, but not as much as with the wild god because going overboard might provoke her ire.

Unlike their previous test subjects, the beast rider project needed to take the feelings of their current participants into account.

"Be careful with that! Qilanxo is on our side!"

"I think that's enough. Qilanxo is starting to get angry!"

Once they finished the preparations, Ves personally climbed up Qilanxo's back and entered the alloy riding cage the Vandals recently developed. He carefully installed the final version of the beast rider neural interface before inviting the first test pilot to strap themselves in and don the interfacing helmet.

"Who's going first?" He asked.

Captain Orfan and Lieutenant Dise looked at each other. No one wanted to go first. From what they observed of the beast rider project, the experts didn't really know what they were doing. A lot of dubious stuff went on that they didn't fully understand.

To be frank, Ves didn't blame them for thinking that the beast rider project muddled about in their research. They hadn't exactly held themselves to the highest standards.

After two minutes of staring into each other's eyes, the two mech pilots still couldn't make up their minds.

"Damnit, just decide already! Go roll a dice, guess a number, play rock-paper-scissors or whatever!"

They eventually employed a random number generator that produced a random number between one and a hundred. Orfan and Dise kept guessing the right number in alternating turns until Dise happened to guess the winning number correctly.

"Forty-two!"

"Correct!" Ves declared, and inputted a command on his comm that displayed the result of the random number generator. "Captain Orfan, it seems you have the honor of going first."

"Damnit." The mech captain cursed. "I hope to hell this neural interface of yours won't fry my brains or anything. You guys tested it on some random dwarf captives, right? Did any of them die?"

Ves released an awkward laugh as some technicians began prepping her into the modified piloting seat. One of the technicians pulled down the interfacing helmet onto her head.

"Technically, all of the dwarves who underwent the proper tests survived."

Captain Orfan looked at Ves with suspicion. Her intuition was quite sharp.

"Why do I get the feeling you're hiding something from me?"

"It doesn't matter." Ves quickly waved his hand. "All of this science stuff shouldn't be of interest to you. Just trust me. You're in good hands here."

Once Captain Orfan sat comfortably in the piloting seat, Ves and the others quickly climbed off Qilanxo's back and stood back at a healthy distance.

There was a risk that Qilanxo might go crazy or lose control over her body. That was why they made sure to conduct the test far away from the camp. A company of mechs surrounded Qilanxo from a fair distance away. That left them close enough to react if Qilanxo became a threat, but far enough away that they wouldn't be in reach if she went on the attack.

"Begin the test."

The neural interface began to connect with Captain Orfan's mind. Ves paid careful attention to this stage because her baseline human brains differed substantially from that of the dwarves. Ves had to incorporate some substantial changes in the interfacing helmet and the settings of the neural interface to compensate.

However, Ves didn't appear to be too worried because the relevant settings weren't too different from those of a standard neural interface for mechs. In other words, this was familiar territory.

Once the beast rider neural interface connected with Qilanxo, Ves held in his breath. The connection engaged smoothly as expected, as Qilanxo brain structure didn't differ too much from the brain structure of a wild god.

After a couple of minutes of stabilization, the connection opened up. Thought patterns translated into data, and data started flowing in both directions.

"Captain Orfan is starting to interface with Qilanxo's mind!"

#### **Chapter 843 Holy Ceremony**

Something profound occurred the moment a solid connection appeared.

A sacred god differed hugely from a wild god. The former possessed a sentient mind, while the latter was a slave to its instincts.

Even Ves couldn't predict what might happen if a mech pilot interfaced with the mind of another sentient being. He had the feeling that what was happening right now was an exceedingly sensitive matter. If the MTA knew he

was doing something like this, they might have suffered a collective heart attack!

So far though, the telemetry sent back by the sensors and monitors showed that their life signs remained stable and within a tolerable range. Captain Orfan's nervousness even subsided a bit, though she seemed to have been whisked into another world.

Ves grew a little bit concerned at her lack of reaction or response. What was she experiencing right now?

"Sir?" One of the experts opened her mouth. "Captain Orfan is showing signs of hallucination. She is experiencing an unusual event. Do we abort the test?"

"No." Ves shook his head. "Just wait and observe for now. Halting the connection might do more harm than good."

Although the instruments didn't mention anything exceptional, Ves kept feeling that something extremely significant was happening. It also happened outside the range of their regular sensors, which was why the experts watching the instruments didn't suspect anything strange.

Ves on the other hand perceived a tiny clue. He focused his attention on his sixth sense and felt a tiny prickling in the distance.

The man-beast connection between Captain Orfan and Qilanxo produced a strange phenomena that Ves couldn't understand! This was unlike anything he had ever witnessed before. Even the first activation of a mech by a mech pilot never led to such a solemn event!

"How much time has passed?" He absently asked.

"Five minutes and going. Sir, we are reading elevated activity in Captain Orfan's body. Her temperature is rising and outside influence is



stimulating her cell activity. None of this is supposed to happen during an interfacing attempt!"

"Didn't we always suspect that a man-beast connection affects the physiology of the human that takes part in this connection?" Ves replied calmly. "Monitor the effects and make sure we don't miss anything. Don't abort the connection without my say so even if the life signs are starting to enter dangerous terrain."

The doctor didn't necessarily agree but what say did he have? Ves was the boss and nobody dared to go against his word.

Besides, Ves also had a point in that interrupting the connection while it facilitated an unknown reaction might threaten Captain Orfan's health.

For better or worse, they had no choice but to let the reaction run its course.

"The rate of data exchange has tripled! Captain Orfan's brain activity has increased drastically!"

"Is it hitting through the upper limit?"

"The data exchange is well within limitations. I think the two are communicating with each other!"

Ves took a look at the readings. While he didn't understand most of it, he figured Captain Orfan and Qilanxo must be exchanging a substantial amount of data, and it wasn't limited to a single level. He made a bold guess that their bodies and minds simultaneously communicated with each other at the speed of thought!

Even as some of the experts puzzled and worried over what exactly went on that caused Captain Orfan to experience all of these physiological changes, Ves maintained a stable demeanor. His rock-like posture emanated boundless

confidence, which silently reassured the experts and prevented them from panicking.

Nonetheless, questions still emerged.

"Why hasn't this phenomenon happened in our previous tests? Is it because we used wildlings and wild gods?"

Ves nodded his head. "What is happening right now should be similar to how a sacred god chooses one of the blessed people to be their chosen. From the descriptions we received at Mulak, this ceremony is extremely holy to the city folk. It's unfortunate that they held back a lot of information."

Nobody expected the first connection attempt to be accompanied by all of this fanfare. Was this why Qilanxo refused to interface with the wildlings? To a sacred god, each connection between the mind of a human came with a lot of implications.

They couldn't be as loose as wild gods who seemingly didn't care whose minds they interfaced with. Interfacing with a sacred god was like bedding a wife for the first time, while interfacing with a wild god was like paying a visit to the town prostitute!

Still, a fundamental question popped up in his mind.

Why did this happen?

"Is it because of the man-beast connection?"

The source of the matter lay with the sacred gods. Nothing like this happened with the wild gods. Old experiments where researchers attempted to interface the mind of a human with the mind of a dog or cat never delivered such drastic results either.

What made sacred gods different? Why did they get to be called sacred?

Ves thought for a little while, ruling out several variables before he fixated on one in particular. He walked away from the experts monitoring the sensor readings of the test pilot's health and approached one of the engineers that monitored the activity of the god crystals borne by Qilanxo.

"Sir, is there anything you need?"

"Are Qilanxo's god crystals doing anything?"

"Their energy reserves are decreasing at a small but steady rate. I can't tell you where the energy is led towards." The engineer said in a confused tone.

"We haven't been able to insert any invasive sensors into Qilanxo's body, and her body outputs too much interference for our deep scans to penetrate her flesh."

Qilanxo was drawing upon energy! And not the regular kind of energy that powered the mechs and machines if the Flagrant Swordmaidens, but pure higher-dimensional energies siphoned from the astral winds!

While Qilanxo never called down an energy tornado since she suffered heavy injuries and entered captivity, none of her god crystals ever ran empty. Even though she expended most of her energy reserves from defending against the massive explosions that overloaded her space barrier, she still retained a low amount of charges that never went anywhere.

Now, for the first time in months, those god crystals finally discharged their higher-dimensional energies.

And it definitely involved the man-beast connection!

"We can only keep observing. I don't think these changes are detrimental." Ves spoke, more to reassure the experts than anything else.

To be sure, any change could come with both benefits and drawbacks. For all he knew, Captain Orfan's body became significantly stronger at the cost of brainwashing her into serving Qilanxo.

Although Qilanxo herself roared at him one day that something like that wouldn't happen, who knew what really went on? Everything they did was new, and Ves felt as if he followed the footsteps of the initial pioneers who first conceived of the idea of piloted mechs and created the first prototype.

Those people were legendary in the mech industry!

As for Ves, he didn't expect to receive any acknowledgement for his achievements. Too much about the planet was shrouded in secrets and mysteries, and none of them could be brought to the light of day.

Around twenty minutes passed as the telemetry transmitted significant fluctuations in temperature, cell activity, brain activity and more. After that, the elevated activity slowly subsided and entered a slightly elevated state that signified that the connection stopped doing any weird stuff.

"It's stabilizing!"

Captain Orfan finally regained clarity. She opened her eyes and adopted an unusually solemn expression. She looked around and ignored the riding cage, the straps holding her in place, and every other artificial element.

She only recognized Qilanxo at that moment. A wonderful sensation occupied her body, and she felt as if she was floating on air besides a massive but intimately familiar entity.

"I am one with Qilanxo." She declared.

Those words carried a strange form of weight. In fact, Ves felt his bones resonated with her voice.

Something exceptional was running through Captain Orfan's body! It empowered her and elevated her beyond her human limitations!

Of course, the telemetry also detected plenty of abnormalities concerning her body, but they only detected the tip of the iceberg. Ves knew that a lot more profound changes occurred than just those adjustments, but he couldn't bring up his theories with anyone because it involved unproven metaphysics.

Ves opened up a comm channel to Captain Orfan. "How do you feel, captain?"

The newly-christened beast rider breathed deeply. "I feel as if I am simultaneously myself and Qilanxo. My body is hot and I feel my mind is split in two!"

"Are you in pain?"

"Heck no! I feel fantastic! It's as if I just finished a long workout and I'm submerged in a bath of hot water!"

"What about your connection with Qilanxo? Are you able to communicate with Qilanxo?"

Captain Orfan looked pensive. "It's not like interfacing a mech. With a mech, I can take control over the frame with no resistance at all. With Qilanxo... it's as if I have to ask permission to do so. Right now, while our minds are connected, she's far too strong compared to me. She hasn't giving me permission to take over control over her limbs."

Interesting! Ves suddenly perked up. He faintly believed that what he just heard could be incredibly relevant to his design philosophy!

This was as if he witnessed someone interfacing with a mech that actually lived! It made sense that the mech wouldn't be willing to surrender unrestricted control to their human mech pilots.

It was like a relationship! Different from an unliving mech that was like a tool, Qilanxo possessed actual feelings and desired to maintain control over her body at all times.

For now, Ves did not even think that far. He just wanted to verify the beast rider neural interface worked without any problems. While unexpected changes did occur, the neural interface wasn't at fault. The abnormalities experienced by Captain Orfan came from the nature of interfacing with a sacred god.

Ves never truly thought about it, but there was something extremely exceptional about interfacing with a sacred god! Far more than interfacing with a wild god, connecting with a sacred god resulted in substantial changes that went far beyond some minor adjustments to the mind of the mech pilot!

At this moment, a profound insight struck him at this time. Could he replicate this effect? Would he eventually be able to design a mech that allowed their mech pilots to experience a drastic transformation?

All of these ideas sounded extremely radical to Ves. Other mech designers didn't even dare to think about these effects. They always pursued tougher armor, harder-hitting rifles, sharper swords and other concrete performance improvements.

What did mechs have to do with transforming their mech pilots? If anyone heard that something like that was possible, they'd dismiss that person as a loon.

While it was true that mech pilots experienced changes as they entered a man-machine connection with their mechs, the inherent traits of a machine only led to minor, gradual improvements in data processing.

It didn't really matter what kind of machine a mech pilot utilized. According to many academic studies, even expert mechs and custom mechs didn't lead to accelerated development.

Yet this seemingly iron-clad rule might not apply when it came to interfacing with living, intelligent entities!

Ves suddenly realized something else. "Every benefit comes with a risk!"

If it was so easy for mech pilots to experience improvements, why wasn't this a widespread method? It was too dangerous! Let alone interfacing with a dog, even interfacing with the mind of a mouse could lead to permanent brain damage!

This was also what made interfacing with the god species so exceptional. Despite being much more formidable lifeforms than a dog or cat, neither the natives nor Captain Orfan experienced any adverse effects with a proper man-machine connection.

He already speculated that the god species were deliberately designed to be interfaced by human entities, but he had severely underestimated the exquisiteness of this trait.

Somehow, the god species were far ahead of mechs in this area!

Ves even began to develop an extremely daring guess. "Is this the next step in the evolution of mechs?"

After all, a man-beast connection shared a lot of commonalities with a man-machine connection. Could Ves transplant what he learned through these experiments and apply them to his mech designs?

"It's too dangerous." He whispered to himself. "I'll have to perform drastic changes to a neural interface. The MTA will crucify me if they learn of my ideas."

Besides, thinking about designing such an exceptional mech was like putting the cart before the horse. He first needed to develop a true 'living' mech before he could think about providing extra benefits to the mech pilot.

#### **Chapter 844 Blessed by a God**

he test ended shortly after the strange phenomena ended. Doctors brought Captain Orfan to the infirmary for a detailed checkup. They worried over her health and wanted to confirm she hadn't suffered any adverse effects from her first attempt at interfacing with Qilanxo.

Ves decided to postpone Lieutenant Dise's turn in light of these circumstances. While he figured that the changes hadn't led to anything bad, he needed to do his due diligence for once. He couldn't treat the Vandals and the Swordmaidens like he treated the dwarves, after all.

"Things are much simpler when I don't have to care about the lives of my test subject."

The newly-christened beast rider underwent a battery of tests, most of which yielded changes in her physiology and brain structure.

Nothing much had changed, but the transformation hadn't stopped at all. Captain Orfan grew quite hungry and ate thrice as much food as usual.

Ves didn't understand the changes Captain Orfan experienced, but the doctors and the exobiologists buzzed all over her medical examinations like a pack of wolves.

She wouldn't be getting free anytime soon.

A handful of exobiologists continued to stay with Qilanxo and tried to study whether she experienced some changes as well, but they found nothing so far. To Ves, it appeared the disparity in size and strength between the two was too great.



"I never knew you could impart something so amazing to your chosen." He said to Qilanxo after he approached in front of her head.

While Qilanxo interfaced with Captain Orfan's mind, a lot of data transferred back and forth. The translation filter Ves worked hard to develop did its job and converted the thought patterns from one format to another.

That didn't mean he could read the data, though. Something like that could only be accomplished by an advanced specialist in neural interface technology. Even Iris Jupiter was far too young to achieve something as difficult as that.

Qilanxo hadn't responded to his comments. She closed her eyes in contentment as if she immersed herself in some pleasant thoughts.

"What did you learn from Captain Orfan? Hopefully it isn't something too sensitive."

Captain Orfan should know better than to reveal classified information, but the problem with neural interfaces was that the stronger mind could forcefully compel the weaker mind to cough up all kinds of information.

They didn't think something like that happened though, because Captain Orfan's mind didn't suffer any signs of stress that usually came about when they attempted to resist a forceful entry. Something similar to the effects of the mental resilience training sessions would have happened.

Qilanxo finally opened her eyes after a minute and gazed at Ves with a profound-looking eye. It was as if she saw Ves in a whole new light.

"I take it you understand who we are what we mean by stating that we come from beyond the stars. There is a vast human civilization beyond this planet's turbulent skies. Aeon Corona VII is nothing compared to the might of our collective strength."

She released a roar that sounded a lot more subdued than Ves had heard before. In his judgement, she sounded as if she took his words a lot more seriously this time.

It was still too difficult for a native who never traveled beyond a couple of ancient cities on a single Super Earth to comprehend the magnitude of a galactic civilization. Just the distance from one star system to another sounded ludicrously far to her. What was a light-year?

Ves kept Qilanxo company and chatted with her for a while. He tried to coax out of her what kind of changes a chosen of a sacred god went through, but the sacred god only roared some platitudes in response.

Either she didn't know, or she didn't want to spill the beans.

In any case, inquiring her was an exercise in futility. He bid her goodbye and visited the infirmary again. He spotted a familiar face and approach her as she studied their new beast rider's medical records.

"Dr. Tillman."

"Mr. Larkinson."

"How is Captain Orfan doing?"

"Her body stopped experiencing changes." She said. "The doctors here assure me that her body isn't at risk, and from what I've seen so far, I have to agree. What happened in the test is fascinating. This must be why the blessed people worship the sacred gods so much."

"Can you tell me what exactly is changing?"

"She is growing fitter and stronger. More interestingly, her genes are changing as well. Her genetic makeup is starting to transition into that of the blessed people!"

"What?!" Ves became startled. "How can a simple man-beast connection change someone's genes?!"

The exobiologist shrugged. "You tell me. You're the expert in this area. All I can say is that Captain Orfan's body is behaving as if she received a high-quality gene boost elixir! A foreign influence has made use of some unknown form of energy to fuel these changes in a surprisingly mild manner. This is just the start. Over the course of a couple of months, her body will slowly adapt until she becomes genetically indistinguishable from the blessed people!"

Ves had not expected the man-beast connection to be able to change a mech pilot to such a fundamental extent. Was this good news or bad news?

By all rights, the blessed people derived much of their genetics from the commissioned officers of the Starlight Megalodon. Their genes underwent a high degree of optimisation that allowed them to be stronger, smarter and more capable than the average baseline human.

Yet the blessed people also experienced further genetic changes that allowed them to adapt to the planet a little better. The largest change of all was that their brain structure incorporated what amounted to an organic neural interface.

It basically meant that once Captain Orfan completed her transformation, she wouldn't have to rely on the beast rider neural interface that Ves and his subordinates painstakingly developed! She could easily interface with the god species through her body's newly gifted capability!

"You could say that Captain Orfan has literally been blessed by a god." Dr. Tillman joked. Of course, in her eyes, a sacred god was anything but divine. "Do you think her organic neural interface allows her to interface with a mech from a distance?"

Ves widened his eyes. "That.. could actually be possible. The effect might be even better if it's done by her than by a native. After all, the blessed people and cursed people both possess radically different thought patterns. In contrast, Captain Orfan is a proper mech pilot who doesn't need a translation filter to pass on proper instructions to a mech."

What did this mean? It basically meant that Captain Orfan got the best of both worlds! She maintained her compatibility with mechs while simultaneously gaining the ability to outright hijack the control of a nearby mech through sheer mental power!

The natives on the other hand could only interfere with the operation of a mech. They couldn't pass on any proper instructions, so they wouldn't be able to turn a mech's rifle against their own side.

In truth, the potential possibilities sounded frightening to Ves. If Captain Orfan really gained these abilities, then she had basically become more than a mech pilot. She transformed into the next step after that!

"Sacred gods are sacred for a reason!" Ves sighed. "Maybe that is the true meaning of the existence of the sacred gods. Anyone who interfaces with them are no longer mortals, but are gifted with strength and power beyond the human norm."

His words hid an even deeper implication. The man-beast connection already showed off the capability to transform someone's body to their very genes.

What about their minds? What about their brains?

Ves feared an even more radical possibility. What if Captain Orfan somehow became affected by Qilanxo's substantial spirituality and received a bit of its potency?

What if Captain Orfan, who had always been stuck in the stage of advanced pilot, showed signs of becoming an expert candidate?

For someone who originally didn't seem to have the aptitude to advance to expert pilot, suddenly gaining the chance to become one after bonding with Qilanxo sounded extremely explosive!

If the galaxy knew that any average mech pilot could become an expert pilot through interfacing with a sacred god, then so many rich and powerful influences would descend on Aeon Corona VII and strip it of everything valuable!

Still, even if this forceful advancement to expert pilot was possible, it shouldn't have come without a price. Qilanxo expended a small but significant amount of higher-dimensional energy stored in her god crystals. Her brain activity also experienced a lot of fluctuations.

Ves didn't think it was likely for her to interface with dozens of people every day and grant them the exact same boon. He simply couldn't believe that something as miraculous as this transformation came for free.

Maybe that was why she didn't seem so eager to talk to him earlier. Now that he thought about it, she seemed a bit more tired than usual.

Of course, all of these thoughts were far too radical to bring up right now. He turned back to Dr. Tillman who silently waited for him to finish his internal deliberations. Among scientists, they knew how important it was to give someone space to compose their thoughts.

"One of the goals to turn our mech pilots into beast riders is because we wanted to communicate with Qilanxo and tie her together with us. The other goal is to find out what is special about beast riders. I don't want this to stop."

Dr. Tillman nodded in agreement. "I admit I'm interested myself, but it is far too hasty to push her to interface with Qilanxo so soon after her body just experienced drastic changes."

"We can't wait that long. The ground expedition is about to move and I hear that Captain Byrd and Commander Lydia have almost finished deciding on our next course of action."

The discussion on where to go and what to do next raged on at the upper level. Some advocated for heading straight towards the Starlight Megalodon, while others thought it would be worthwhile to approach an ancient city to trade or coerce them into revealing some of their secrets.

If the two commanding officers decided to risk an interaction with an ancient city, then having Qilanxo by their side would help their chances immensely. The sacred gods and blessed people that inhabit the ancient cities tended to be insular and extremely wary of foreigners.

"I'll take your request under advisement, but it is truly a little irresponsible for us to allow the good captain to become exposed to this external influence again. Especially since we don't even have a complete grasp of all of the changes."

They parted on uncertain terms. Ves wanted to make haste, while Dr. Tillman wanted to understand what had changed after a single interfacing session. She also took the side of the doctors who worried about Captain Orfan's health.

Two days later, the Flagrant Swordmaidens finally packed up their camp and began to move. A procession of mechs and legged transports slowly began to march after a lengthy break!

Qilanxo followed after the slow-moving heavy transports. She regained her usual reticence after the first time she interfaced with Captain Orfan. Lieutenant Dise kept her company while her other beast rider was still being monitored in the mobile infirmary.

The large dwarf tribe they left behind regained their freedom. The wildlings imprisoned in the temporary internment camps gained a lot of trauma from their ordeal. Many dwarves were missing, particularly their chieftain, beast riders and their best warriors.

More importantly, they no longer enjoyed the protection of their bonded wild gods!

This instantly broke apart a long-standing tribe that dominated this region for decades!

Many dwarf warriors attempted to fight for leadership, but all their struggle did was to accelerate the tribe's collapse. Many workers lost their jobs and the underclass as a whole began to starve as the tribe hadn't been moving anywhere.

Encountering the foreigners with their giant machines had been a disaster for their tribe!

#### **Chapter 845 Too Close**

"So where are we going?" Ves asked Chief Dakkon as they both entered a mobile lab that conducted research on the god crystals.

They made some minor breakthroughs lately after performing some invasive experiments on the large dwarf tribe's wild gods. There was hope that the engineers and researchers could crack the secret to exciting the god crystals in order to generate power.

"You're not going to like it, Ves." Chief Dakkon sighed. "The two ladies decided that they don't want to deal with the headaches of trying to negotiate or fight with the sacred gods of the nearest ancient city. They also think a visit will waste an enormous amount of time. We've already suffered several weeks-long interruptions in our journey."

Ves did look disappointed. He really wanted to obtain a good look at how the ancient cities managed to maintain their antigrav fields for several millennia without relying on vulnerable technology.

"Don't they know that the breakdown effect is only increasing the closer we get to the Starlight Megalodon? While it's true the ancient cities are rather troublesome to approach, we can gain substantial benefits from finding out how they are able to accomplish certain matters. It would be great if we capture more sacred gods and turn them to our side like we did with Qilanxo."

"Whoa, there, slow down Ves! In truth, Captain Byrd isn't very eager for us to become too distracted by how the natives do things. The more we become enamored by the natives and the sacred gods, the more we lose the essence of what makes us Vandals. We're a mech regiment, not a beast rider regiment!"

That pulled Ves back from his obsession. He shook his head to clear his mind. "Is this why Captain Byrd refuses to visit an ancient city?"

"Exactly." Dakkon said. "She prefers we focus on developing a solution against the breakdown effect through our own efforts rather than attempt to replace our mechs with exobeasts. Besides, she's also convinced we've delayed long enough. She wants us to march straight through the storm lands and reach the Starlight Megalodon before any of our rivals get their first."

"Then what about the breakdown effect? You know as well as I do that we can't solve this problem by snapping our fingers."

"We'll find a way. We're the Vandals. Resourcefulness is rooted in our genes."

"Do you really believe that, or is that just expressing your support for Captain Byrd's decision?"

The chief engineer grinned. "In fact, I think I'm onto something here. I've come up with several theories related to the god crystals that might help. They are



derived from the astral winds and share much of the same properties. I think if we can employ them correctly, we might be able to mitigate the spacetime distortion that occurs when the astral winds experience turbulence."

That actually sounded like it might actually work!

"How far are you into looking into this solution?"

"We haven't even activated the god crystals yet." Chief Dakkon shook his head. "Do you think we've made any headway into applications? We have to learn how to walk before we can learn how to run. Solving the power generation issue the highest priority of our research team. While there may be a chance that the breakdown effect won't be as serious as we thought, but we'll definitely run out of energy before we even make it to the battleship."

The Flagrant Swordmaidens needed to get their priorities straight. While the energy budget deficit and the breakdown effect appeared to be equally as crippling to their combat effectiveness, they really couldn't do without the energy necessary to move forward and fight.

As for the breakdown effect, Ves suspected that the brass didn't actually hold out much hope for a solution. Yet that shouldn't be enough of a reason to avoid the ancient cities.

"In truth, there's more than that." The chief engineer hesitated. "When Captain Orfan underwent an inspection at the infirmary, she passed on a message imparted into her mind by Qilanxo."

Ves became surprised. A message? Why didn't she mention anything to him in their earlier interaction?

"What did Qilanxo want to say?"

"Qilanxo addressed her message directly to Captain Byrd. I haven't heard the message, but from what I heard of the people around her, Qilanxo evidently

didn't want us to march up to another ancient city and ruin their old way of life."

"And Captain Byrd acquiesced?"

"She did once she heard that Qilanxo promised to cooperate fully with us. That includes allowing us to study her god crystals and perform detailed tests of their operation! She even claims she can show us how she can direct her god crystals to generate an antigrav field!"

This was absolutely big! Up until now, Qilanxo always gave the impression that she only reluctantly played along with the Flagrant Swordmaidens. If she changed her mind and voluntarily showed them all of her tricks, was there any need to barge into an ancient city anymore?

Ves smiled ruefully at the chief. "Qilanxo must care a lot about the ancient cities and the people and sacred gods that dwell inside them. For her to offer this concession must have weighed on her a lot."

"Captain Byrd must have been convinced by Qilanxo's sincerity, because she contacted Commander Lydia right after and came to a consensus."

They both ruminated in silence while they watched on as the researchers conducted yet another test related to the god crystals.

"It's true that we've disturbed the lives of the natives everywhere we went."

Ves said after he reflected over the actions the ground forces took so far.

"We're walking disasters to the degenerated savages. Nothing good happens to those we encounter. Still, I didn't think that Qilanxo has it in herself to sacrifice her freedom and wellbeing for the good of her own kind. Maybe the sacred gods are more human than we think."

"Don't be silly, Ves. The sacred gods may carry a fancy name, but they're intelligent exobeasts at best. They're fascinating sentients but they're completely alien from us. You've been working too much on Qilanxo. Don't

forget whose side you are on. If it's a choice between us and Qilanxo, I hope you don't make the wrong decision."

"I know what is best for me." Ves quickly replied. "Qilanxo may be a fascinating individual, but she's as alien as the dwarves to me. I still want to get back to the Bright Republic, you know, and I can't do that if I don't have a ride home. I'm not the kind of short-sighted fool who's gone native and fights against my former comrades like a bad adventure drama."

Those kinds of stories were a staple of entertainment for several thousand years. Ever since humanity rose into space from the Age of Stars, they dreamt of encountering alien cultures locked to a single isolated planet.

Some of these stories even possessed a true basis. Humans stranded on untamed planets often forgot that they were part of a starfaring civilization when they no longer had access to the greater galaxy.

Ves already spent a few months on Seven and realized he may have already gone native in some aspects of his thinking.

"Have you got your head on straight again, Ves?"

"I do. Thank you for the reminder."

"Heh, for all your smarts, you still have a lot to learn from old men like me. I've already been around for a while, so I know how easy it is for young fellows like you to get caught up in your passion."

Ves left the lab and took a breath of the local air. Seven perpetually smelled like virgin lands. If not for the heavy gravity and the breakdown effect, this would have been a fantastic place to start up a colony.

Now that the beast rider project pretty much completed most of its objectives, he decided to convene the experts and disband the team.

While they still had a lot of follow-up assignments to complete, they didn't need to follow his direction anymore.

"Some of you will be assigned to the new beast rider support staff, while the rest will resume your regular duties. No matter where you go, I hope you take the lessons we learned to heart."

Over the following days, Ves wound down the beast rider project and handed over the data and their research to the new permanent support staff for the beast riders. Now that the beast rider interface worked as advertised, Ves no longer needed to be involved.

He became eager to wind down the beast rider project because he recognized that he became too involved in this matter. While he still enjoyed interacting with Qilanxo and finding out the meaning behind the grand design her species was apart of, he didn't want to lose himself.

Ves was a mech designer!

Best to leave the puzzles related to Qilanxo and the natives to the exobiologists!

Once he surrendered his responsibilities as project head, he felt liberated. No longer did he felt driven by the urge to continue his research. There was something wonderfully addicting about performing research into something new and learning something new in this way.

"It's a lot harder to learn something by finding it out by yourself than to read established theories from a textbook."

In any case, there was no longer a need to develop a neural interface, so Ves really couldn't justify his continued involvement regarding the beast riders. Although he often equated riding an exobeast to piloting a mech, in truth Ves forced that perspective onto himself.

"I should get back at what I'm best and work with mechs again."

He transferred over to a mobile workshop and met up with Ketis again.

"Hey Ves! What are you here for?"

"I'm finally done with heading the beast rider project. My job is done, so I'm back to resume my old duties."

"FINALLY!" Ketis shouted. "You can't believe the kind of silly crap I have to deal with every day! The mechs keep getting worse and the mech technicians keep getting dumber!"

"Oh? I didn't think it's gotten so bad."

Ketis went to a console and displayed a chart to him. It depicted the amount of breakdowns and malfunctions over a span of a month.

The frequency of technical incidents steadily rose as if it climbed up a hill!

"Damn." He cursed. "The rate of increase is steeper than I thought. Tell me about the problems you're encountering. I want to have an idea on which parts break down faster."

"Well, it's mostly the legs that give up the ghost first. There's a large amount of moving parts there and they're all interdependent on each other. The legs also have to support the entire weight of the mechs, so if all of that force presses down on a misaligned component, it might snap and cause the mech to trip."

"What about the microcomponents? The processors and such? Have they been breaking down as well?"

"Surprisingly, no. There's not much moving around except for energy. However, we've been keeping a close watch on our 3D printers, and some of its internal parts have already become skewed a few times."

"We should check the 3D printers more often." Ves judged. "There's a lot of moving parts inside a 3D printer, but the problem is that they are small and delicate and therefore easier to break. A mech is still a war machine, so many of its components can still take a beating. That doesn't apply to 3D printers. It only takes a moderate bump for them to stop functioning."

Ves really worried about the 3D printers and a couple of other vitally-important production equipment.

If a mech broke down, then fine. They could always fix it up again somehow.

If all of their 3D printers and their tools broke down, then they didn't have any means to fix up their mechs. What then? The Flagrant Swordmaidens would no longer be any different from the savages if they lost all of their mechs and equipment!

#### **Chapter 846 True to Mechs**

The long days of marching continued. The mechs and legged transports moved forward at the pace of a snail. They couldn't help it as the heavy transports needed to fight against the heavy gravity without the aid of energy-intensive antigrav fields.

Of course, they still bled an enormous amount of energy like a sieve. Their energy budget looked worse and worse by the day. The demand for a solution to their energy deficit grew stronger as the amount of charged energy cells in storage decreased.

They were like thirsting refugees fleeing across an arid desert. Where could they find an oasis? Where could they quench their raging thirst?

Ves began to involve himself with the repair and maintenance of the Vandal mechs. He also checked how much progress Ketis achieved in solving difficult problems.

"I'm quite impressed you're capable of solving these thorny issues." He said as he browsed through a log that described the various serious breakdowns she solved. "Although there's room for improvement, you've become more and more inventive."

She snorted. "Those mechs tend to break down in the same way. Some parts just fail harder than other parts for some reason. Also, the mech technicians aren't entirely clueless. They've been solving the same problems over and over to the point where they don't need to call me anymore when a mech rolls in with the exact same issue."

"I see." Ves declined to point out that she questioned the intelligence of the mech technicians many times. "All of this sounds great, but haven't you ever thought about strengthening the error-prone parts so that they don't fail in the exact same way next time?"

Ketis looked at Ves as if he spoke an alien language. "Whuzzah?"

"You're treating the symptoms instead of the root cause of the disease."

"I thought the disease is the breakdown effect."

"Look, Ketis, the difference between mech designers and chief technicians is that the former makes sure to prevent recurring problems while the latter will keep getting hit on the head."

"Are you calling me stupid again?!"

Ves first stopped at a projection of one simple rifleman mech and amplified its leg area. "According to the logs, you've repaired this same mech five times for the same mechanical breakdown since I put you in charge, is that correct?"

"Yeah. Look at this joint here. It can't hold up to uneven pressure at all. It's so badly-designed that it practically snaps like a twig if uneven pressure is

applied, which tends to happen a lot when random parts in the legs start messing up."

Ves tapped his armored finger against the surface of the console. "Haven't you ever considered redesigning this joint section into a stronger version?"

"I ah.. That's kind of hard, you know. Also, I'm just a guest designer. The Vandals don't trust me if I make any changes."

That was a valid concern. Ves expected more from Ketis, but she could be excused from holding back if she thought the Vandals didn't want her to become too involved with their mechs. She already gained a lot of insights about their machines.

Still, the Vandals had themselves to blame. None of the mech designers sent with the ground expedition were any good. Even Ketis lacked the required capability, but at least she was humble enough to know her shortcomings and earnest enough to learn.

"Alright, I'm back in charge for now, so you don't need to worry about that stuff. I'll take care of it myself. You've already learned the most valuable lessons anyway."

"Does that mean I'm no longer in charge of supervising the workshops?" She sounded like she might actually miss the job despite complaining about it all the time.

While Ves was tempted to keep her as his free helper for a while longer, she needed to expand her horizons. He shook his head. "It's not that helpful to your development unless you're willing to take some risks and start modifying the designs of our mechs. Since this is a rather sensitive matter, I don't advise you to begin doing so with us. Go back to Mayra at the Swordmaidens and tell her what I told you. I think she'll be more than willing to show you the ropes. Modifying a mech is like designing a variant, except it already exists."



After lecturing her a bit about the importance of learning how to modify a mech, Ves packed her off and virtually kicked her out to the Swordmaiden portion of the expedition.

Ves felt a little lonely now that Ketis had left. He knew he placed a bit too much interest in her development as a mech designer.

"Ketis, Qilanxo, what else? Am I becoming too attached to things, or is this an expression of what it is like to be human?"

He considered his interest in Qilanxo to be the same as loving a pet. That reminded him of Lucky. It had been years since he last held Lucky in his grasp. He hoped the people back on Cloudy Curtain took care of his mechanical cat and fed him lots of exotic minerals.

"I hope that mischievous cat doesn't get in trouble."

For lack of a better option, Ves strapped the comm holding the Mech Designer System onto Lucky's neck like a collar. With regards to the System, he couldn't trust anyone but Lucky with its safety.

Still, a long time had passed, and even more time would pass before he returned home. Ves really wanted to know how the Living Mech Corporation fared in his absence.

"At this stage in the war, reduced consumer spending, increased debt and resource shortages will surely affect my company's bottom line. The future won't be bright for the mech industry for the next couple of years."

The mech industry in the Bright Republic followed a boom-bust cycle. Times of prosperity alternated with times of misery and both market demand and resource costs fluctuated wildly.

According to historical trends, many mech manufacturers had already gone bust, particularly the smaller ones whose mech designers got drafted to serve the Republic.

After the war, a deep recession often set in as the demand for mechs fell to a low. A lot of forces including the Mech Corps incurred huge debts when they replenished their war losses in order to maintain their combat strength.

Therefore, they no longer ordered new mechs. Sometimes, they even tried to get rid of their used mechs in the second-hand market.

Veterans discharged from the Mech Corps cleverly founded their mercenary corps during this time and snapped up these second-hand mechs on the cheap.

Why buy a brand-new mech when a lightly-used mech that performed just as good was up to fifty percent cheaper?

It was hard for mech manufacturers to compete against the flood of used mechs. In addition, the transition to the next generation of mechs happened about half a decade later.

At this point in time, who wanted to purchase a currentgen mech that turned into lastgen trash goods in a relatively short amount of time?

Many mech procurers possessed a lot of savvy. They had to be, as even the cheapest mechs cost 3 million credits. With such vast sums being thrown around, it wasn't easy to fool these informed buyers.

"Maybe the minimum cost will be bumped up to 4 million credits instead soon."

The Bright Republic always spent more money than they earned. All of this deficit spending sent inflation soaring and sent the economy into a tumble.

Despite these pessimistic prospects, Ves remained confident that the LMC was able to tide over this difficult period.

"A recession is also a blessing to those who know how to grasp the opportunities."

A lot of businesses went bust, a lot of people got laid off and a lot of equipment and gear got dumped into the market. As long as the LMC still stood, there may be a way to double or triple its assets in less than a year.

However, the prerequisite of it all was that Ves and the company possessed an abundant amount of capital. Without money, how could he obtain anything?

Ves did not worry too much about the issue of money. Even if the LMC dug itself into a financial hole, the prosperity of a mech manufacturer depended on the abilities of the mech designer. Ves possessed enough confidence that he could make up any shortfall through both legal and illegal means.

Just the rudimentary ultracompact battery he developed by himself possessed an amazing amount of value to the tune of billions of credits. If necessary, he could anonymously sell it once or twice without drawing too much attention.

If he sold more than that in a short amount of time, he'd definitely attract unwanted attention, so he couldn't resort to such means for long.

"Well, it's just one of the many ways in which I can use what I learned to my advantage."

Ves waved away his thoughts for the future and focused on the present. He began to fall into his familiar role of overseeing the mech workshops. He also took a step ahead of Ketis and started lightly revising the designs of individual mechs to make them less error-prone.

If the same part broke three or more times in a row, then that signified a weak point in the design. As a mech designer, Ves couldn't stand such a vulnerability left alone.

While all of this work was rather tedious and not very challenging to Ves, he felt as if he nurtured his soul by getting back to mechs.

He slowly reflected on himself and realized that he had become too obsessed with his research on neural interfaces.

"I think I went a little bit overboard there."

His drive to learn and his hunger for knowledge cropped up again and pushed him to cross all kinds of dangerous lines. Spending too much time on this isolated planet made Ves lose all fear of repercussions.

"I can't continue that kind of behavior once I leave the frontier. The MTA and CFA may be non-existent threats here, but in civilized space they are very much a force to be reckoned with, even if they seem distracted lately."

Nonetheless, as much as researching the man-beast connection allowed him to learn a lot about mechs and gave him a bunch of inspiration, it was a bit too far removed from his core interests.

"I have to be more rational."

The problem was that mech designers depended heavily on passion to fuel their motivation. Ves encountered plenty of mech designers who possessed hollow passion but extremely rational minds.

They normally tended to be risk-averse cowards and losers.

"You can't get anywhere as a mech designer if you don't take some risks. The best motivation to take risks is when you pursue your passion!"

Ves needed to achieve a balance between passion and rationality. He needed to think with his mind as well as his heart.

While that sounded simple on paper, it was much harder to achieve in reality because humans were emotional creatures.

This was why he valued his return to normality. Resuming his old duties and getting his hands on mechs again cleansed his soul and doused the fires that drove him to irrational, hot-headed pursuits.

"Is this what every high-ranking mech designer has to struggle with?" He asked himself.

Ves felt a temptation to switch to full-time research. As long as any mech designer possessed a half-decent foundation in the sciences, they could explore the wondrous possibilities of what was possible by themselves and develop new theories or technologies.

Yet Ves had always been taught that a mech designer should never be a full-time researcher. They needed to stay in touch with practice by designing mechs and selling them. Only through delivering finished products would mech designers be able to stay true to mechs.

"I think the most difficult skill a mech designer isn't their design ability or their learning ability. It's not their ability to be responsive to the market or fabricate a mech without faults."

A mech designer still had to be good at those, but at their core all of those skills depended on one of the most basic ones of all.

"No. The most difficult skill by far is self-control."

#### **Chapter 847 Another Use for Dwarves**

Crossing over in the storm lands marked the formal start of their isolation. For some reason, the terrain became a lot more rougher and uneven. Scars and impact craters marred the ground and vegetation grew unevenly or with more mutation. It made the environment resemble a primal playground that still needed a couple of hundred-million years to settle down.

Even the wildlife grew more feral. Fewer animal hordes roamed the lands, but each individual beast seemed larger and deadlier. The carnivores who preyed on them had a tough fight on their hands if they hunted a healthy herbivore!

No more ancient cities dwelled in the storm lands. No sacred gods held territory here.

Another difference in the storm lands was that the prevalence of godlings and wild gods increased by at least twice or thrice. As lizard-like carnivores, they competed against regular carnivores who almost always lost the struggle.

In turn, however, the godlings competed much more aggressively over territory. They fought and dueled against each other to hold large scraps of lands. Those who failed to claim a territory for themselves had to resort to scavenging or other ignoble means of existence. Their calorie intake couldn't keep up with their growth, and over time they starved to death before reaching the final prize.

Only very few godlings possessed the strength, cunning and luck to survive for a century. Once they finally bridged over the final gap, they became wild gods.

Yet these wild gods inhabiting a land devoid of any ancient cities and sacred gods did not laze about every day. The struggle for territory continued on even fiercer. While wild gods didn't need to go out and eat very often, they always ate an enormous amount during every feeding session.

Therefore, wild gods required an even greater intake of food, and that meant that they needed to claim far more territory than in their younger stage.

Since wild gods could easily live for thousands of years, Aeon Corona VII would eventually be flooded with wild gods if they kept popping up! Yet as massive as the planet stretched, it could only sustain so many hungry mouths.

This inevitably led to a lot of duels between wild gods. The feral, irascible creatures didn't possess any exceptional intelligence if they hadn't come in touch with any humans.

The normal instinct of a wild god pushed them to claim everything for themselves. Sharing territory or forming a pack was a step too far for these apex predators.

Since each wild god possessed strange powers, their battles often led to destructive effects. Some of the terrain still bore their marks to this day, which sometimes forced the ground expedition to take detours.

It was worse when the Flagrant Swordmaidens encountered battling wild gods on their way. They always took wider detours as it wasn't worth it to subdue the massive creatures with their mechs.

A detour cost much less energy than killing the dueling wild gods!

The declining reserves of energy over the past month prompted the brass to institute a widespread cutback on their energy usage.

Both mechs and transports dialed down to a lower power setting, but the gravitic backpacks and antigrav modules working to keep them light enough drained so many batteries and energy cells that their future prospects looked poor.

Some found the decision to turn away from the ancient cities and decline a chance to learn from some of their methods was a big mistake. The blessed people survived for millenia on a heavy gravity planet. While they seem poor and degenerated right now, that made their continued survival all the more exceptional!

"We could have progressed a lot further in our research in the god crystals if we traded some essential goods from the ancient cities." Chief Dakkon

lamented. "Hopefully, this final trial will finally allow us to achieve what we should have accomplished a month ago."

"I hope so as well." Ves said.

Inside one of the mobile labs, both of them stood inside an observation room that overlooked an experimental chamber that held one of their pure god crystals. They possessed many more, but they had all been collecting dust in the vault all this while.

While the beast rider project had ended long ago and transferred its results to the beast rider support staff, the god crystal project still hadn't been able to make any substantial progress as of late.

Qilanxo hadn't been of much help, as much of her usage of the god crystals appeared to be instinctive. It was like she moved an extra limb. How could she describe what she did to people who didn't possess this extra limb?

Therefore, the god crystal project stalled as the engineers and researchers working on this project only achieved minor results.

Yet the holy grails of calling down an energy tornado to fill up its energy reservoirs and discharging the energy in a form that the Vandals could make use of still remained out of reach!

"Hasn't Qilanxo helped you out by demonstrating both of these capabilities?" Ves asked.

Chief Dakkon sighed. "She's done so several times, but taking sensor readings is one thing. Replicating the phenomenon is another thing entirely. We don't understand the underlying principles. The only thing we learned is that all of this stuff is extremely complicated and goes way over our heads. Therefore, we've been resorting to trial and error to rule out the wrong approaches. The upcoming test is the final approach left."



After Captain Orfan finally came out of the infirmary after a week of testing and examinations, their cooperation with Qilanxo kicked up a gear. Lieutenant Dise of the Swordmaidens underwent a ceremony as well with the sacred god, although her transformation seemed to be a bit less intense.

Qilanxo did say there was a reason they generally limited themselves to selecting only one chosen at a time. There wouldn't be any point of selecting a third chosen, as she didn't have any capacity to spare to bear the burden.

Her age and abundant amount of god crystals were the only reason she could handle the load of choosing two humans to be her representatives.

As the beast riders enabled Qilanxo to speak to the Flagrant Swordmaidens directly, they understood each other much better. Qilanxo was able to teach them much, but the problem was that she was an exobeast.

What would she know of the sciences? She didn't understand any of the mechanisms and theories behind her body structure, metaphysical powers or even the purpose of her own existence!

Therefore, it took one long month for the god crystal project to reach this point.

"Prepare the experiment!"

The god crystal resting in the center of the chamber was not alone this time. For one reason or another, an exobiologist grafted a bulbous piece of flesh onto its surface!

It looked like the god crystal became infected with some kind of horrible alien parasite!

"What's the deal with that mass of flesh?" Ves asked.

"It's the solution we finally came up with." Chief Dakkon grimaced. "We tried many ways of inciting the god crystals to activate and perform a function. It

turned out for all our methods, we missed the most obvious one. The sacred gods are able to activate the god crystals by coming in touch with them and using their thoughts to direct their functions. So what the exobiologists did is to clone Qilanxo's tissue to create an artificial nerve structure."

"That doesn't sound like much."

"That's because there's more to the point. We believe strong thoughts are needed to activate the god crystals, so we've captured a dwarf chieftain and took out its brains and put them into that fleshy ball that's responsible for keeping it alive.

"What?! You're depending on dwarf brains?!" Ves was amazed at this crazy but ingenious solution.

"Sounds crazy, right?" The chief engineer grinned. "Yet according to our rudimentary theories, a single god crystal doesn't require much input to do its work. However, for some reason, only the natives are able to unlock them. There's no use in cloning brains from scratch or to use mouse brains or dog brains. Only an actual individual who grew up on this planet fits the right category."

All of this sounded extremely convoluted. If Ves asked someone like Dr. Tillman directly, she would likely spend half a day to lecture him about the greatness of using transplanted dwarf brains as a way to excite the god crystals.

In the storm lands, the wildlings roamed in lesser numbers. However, they were twice as ferocious as gathered together in large tribes more often.

Each large tribe also inevitably enjoyed the protection of at least one bonded wild god.

The Flagrant Swordmaidens generally chose to detour around them when the scouts detected a large tribe on their way to prevent any conflict.

Overall, the wildling tribes weren't afraid of competing directly against the wild gods for territory. Since a bonded wild god benefited from the intelligence from its dwarf rider, they usually obtained the upper hand.

"Chief, the preparations are done. We can start the experiment right away."

"Commence the experiment!"

Someone behind a control panel activated a command to the fleshy growth. The dwarf brains inside had been crudely reprogrammed into an organic computer of sorts. While it was impossible for the Flagrant Swordmaidens to wipe the mind, the exobiologists did their best which managed to impart them with the command to send out a specific thought pattern on command.

This time, the dwarf brains received the instructions of discharging a small amount of energy in the god crystal in the form of electricity.

The control panels displayed various parameters beginning to spike.

Something was happening!

Several experts and specialists reported various changes, but Ves didn't pay attention to them. Instead, he looked at the god crystal and the fleshy growth and faintly sensed a tingling in his sixth sense.

Ves understood what the Flagrant Swordmaidens missed for several months.

The god crystals could only interact with spirituality!

Since dead and non-living objects generally didn't possess any spirituality, it was no wonder the god crystals didn't react to any external stimuli. Pushing it, electrocuting it, heating it, blasting it with radiation and more had nothing to do with spirituality.

Only a living mind possessed this elusive trait!

Even though a wildling or any other normal human for that matter possessed a negligible amount of spirituality, they still possessed a tiny flame. Normally, this untouchable bit of spirituality had no meaningful interaction with the outside world, but the god crystals were very different from the norm.

The dwarf brains might only possess a feeble flame, but it was more than enough to turn some kind of switch in the god crystal.

A simple electronic apparatus connected to the other end of the god crystal. Shortly after the god crystal began glowing, the apparatus glowed as well as it absorbed an uneven amount of power.

"We've detected direct current! The god crystal is powering the testing apparatus!"

"The current is unstable! Power levels are rising! They're spiking!"

The god crystal suddenly discharged a lightning bolt's worth of energy to the apparatus at once, and the fuses blew immediately!

Nonetheless, none of the experts cared about this disaster.

"We did it! We generated electricity!"

"We have a new power source!"

"It won't be long before we can turn the god crystals into power generators!"

Chief Dakkon smiled, though he didn't join the jubilation. "Why are you celebrating?! We're nowhere done right now! Our dwarf brains have fried and the fuses are blown! More than that, the god crystal is out of juice and we have no way to recharge it yet!"

The Flagrant Swordmaidens still hadn't figured out the method to excite the god crystal into siphoning higher-dimensional energy and matter from the astral winds.

Still, now that they proved that making use of dwarf brains as controllers worked, they were on the right track! The god crystal project expected to make brisk progress now that they no longer ran around like headless chickens.

#### **Chapter 848 Sick Generator**

When the Flagrant Swordmaidens finally found a way to discharge the remnant energy inside the god crystals in the form of electricity, they quickly got the ball rolling.

Two days after the first successful test, they managed to stabilize the output of the god crystal. It wouldn't discharge all of its energy in a single instant anymore and could be commanded to release a stable output.

Another day after that, the god crystal project managed to get a god crystal to release its energy in the form of heat, electromagnetic radiation, sound waves and more.

While the researchers hadn't managed to find a way to shape the output of a god crystal into an antigrav field or something similar, it was only a matter of time before they found the key.

A week after the initial test, the god crystal project finally managed to solve their most important goal, which was to get the god crystals to siphon energy from the astral winds!

A single god crystal only called down a thin line from the skies, and filled up its energy reserves extremely slowly.

Even though that was a pathetic result, it finally presented hope to the Flagrant Swordmaidens! No longer did they have to rely on their meager amount of power generators for a continued source of energy!

"One god crystal isn't enough! We have to use them in unison!"

The more god crystals that activated at the same time, the easier the siphoning occurred. At some point, enough god crystals called down an energy tornado that drastically increased the charging rate!

With over fifty god crystals in their possession, they possessed enough god crystals to feed the daily needs of the Flagrant Swordmaidens!

"Once we build the surrounding infrastructure, we'll finally be running an energy surplus!"

In truth, they barely maintained the status quo, and that was only when they didn't increase their energy usage through combat. Still, as long as they kept running a deficit, all of their empty batteries and energy cells would no longer be useless anymore. They'd be able to build up a healthy reserve of energy and expend them whenever the situation demanded!

"I'm really glad we finally cracked the code." Chief Dakkon sighed when he met with Ves again. "Captain Byrd has been hounding me every day for a solution. I can finally get a good night's sleep for once."

Ves looked on as the god crystal project worked on an abomination of a machine. Ten god crystals rested on some kind of giant cage with masses of fleshy tissue locked inside the cage. It looked extremely unsettling and only the exobiologists dared to get close!

"How many dwarf brains are inside that fleshy mass?"

"Twenty, two for each god crystal. It's always good to have a spare."

The Vandals kidnapped twenty dwarves from the storm lands and cut off their brains from their bodies to make this unholy abomination. Even to Ves, that sounded extremely gruesome.

Yet to the god crystal project, this god crystal generator represented their salvation. It was at least several times better at generating energy than a conventional power generator!

With five of them, the Flagrant Swordmaidens wouldn't have to worry about running short on energy for a very long time!

Ves witnessed them at work many times. Over the last two weeks, the god crystal project rapidly developed the god crystal generator and cobbled together five of them at a time.

They still encountered a couple of problems though. The dwarf brains weren't very good at passing on instructions, as the Vandal researchers possessed a poor grasp in the field of reprogramming a mind.

"These dwarf brains think about all kinds of stupid thoughts even when they are separated from their heads! They're filled with chaos!"

This was why it sometimes took a while for the god crystal generators to get going. Still, all of these problems could be solved in time.

The main issue was that the Flagrant Swordmaidens no longer had to be so conservative with their energy expenditure!

Even simple luxuries like cooked food and extra projectors for work or entertainment made a lot of difference among the men. Having marched for so long on land, the mindless travel was starting to grate on their patience.

The only reason why they hadn't acted out was because the storm lands were filled with danger. Any mech or person who wandered off would be vulnerable to the wild gods and the large wildling tribes that regularly roamed these parts.

The only snags they hit was that they still hadn't found a way to generate an antigrav field with the god crystals and that the breakdown effect became steadily more impactful.

The 3D printers the Vandals heavily depended on already started suffering breakdowns as well. They had to shut down the machines and open it up to fix whatever broke. Due to the size and complexity of these machines, it always took at least half a day to solve a problem, which significantly delayed repairs to mechs.

Fortunately, with Ves at the helm, the mechs didn't actually break down faster. "Prevention is better than cure! There's no way I'm going to let the same problem happen five times in a row as if I'm a stupid bot!"

The modifications he imposed on the mechs gave the mech technicians a lot of extra work. They grumbled and whined, but did not dare to do so openly in front of Ves. Since he often inspected the workshops, the mech technicians didn't dare to slack off.

It didn't take long for his modifications to yield results! There was even a period of time where the Vandals suffered less malfunctions than before.

Of course, the breakdown effect steadily grew in strength, so they only enjoyed a brief reprieve.

Over at the Swordmaidens, Mayra had already instituted these changes long ago. Unlike the Vandals, the main mechs of the Swordmaidens such as the Devil Razor and Silver Valencia had all been designed from her hand.

As the developer of these swordsman mechs, Mayra was able to design much more comprehensive modifications that addressed the problem much more effective than what Ves had done.

Ves decided to pay a visit to her workshop during the next long break for the day. As the legged transports halted, the men and women rapidly erected a handful of temporary prefab structures to make camp. Everyone had done this so many times that they became extremely practiced in assembling and



disassembling these structures that served as a temporary barracks, mess hall, workshop and more.

After he crossed over the the Swordmaiden side of the camp and entered one of its workshops, he greeted Mayra.

"Hey!"

"Ves."

"How is Ketis doing lately?"

"She's been around." Mayra said mildly. "I appreciate the experience you granted her. She's much more respectful of the mech workshops now ever since she worked alongside some real mech technicians."

Looking at Mayra's calm expression as she sat behind a terminal in her combat armor made Ves mistake her as an officer. Everytime he met her in person, he became impressed by her poise.

This trait alone turned her into an anomaly among pirates! Her self-control must be leagues ahead of Ves!

Ves smiled. "I'm glad to hear that Ketis is better. As a former teacher of her, I can't help but see a lot of promise in her. As long as she keeps up her current work ethic, there's no way she'll remain stuck at the bottom."

Both of them looked at each other with mutual understanding. Even though Ves didn't know Ketis all that long, he really wanted her to succeed, if only because she was his first serious student!

"Why have you come here? I doubt it's just to chat. You don't visit very often."

"I've been wanting to talk to you about the breakdown effect." Ves said. "From what I've observed from the Swordmaiden mechs and from what I know of my own capabilities, we're only able to cope with the situation for a month or two. If the breakdown effect keeps becoming stronger at the same rate, then there

comes a point where we're unable to catch up. By then, we'll have to take much longer breaks in order to repair all of the mechs."

"The problem is weighing on our minds as well, you know. However, our research capability is much less impressive than that of the Vandals. We know how to fight and how to maintain our mechs, but dealing with these unusual phenomena is outside of our reach."

"I thought you Swordmaidens visited all kinds of dangerous and exotic planets."

Mayra smiled ruefully at Ves. "Even in the frontier, we only pick the low-hanging fruit. There is a lot of riches to be gained in these restricted planets, but the risk of getting stranded or annihilated through sudden circumstances is too great. The only people who dare to visit a planet as dangerous as Aeon Corona VII are the hardcore treasure hunting expeditions. Our courage may be great, but we aren't impulsive enough to throw ourselves straight into a disadvantageous situation."

"What if you encounter something like the breakdown effect?"

"We would just give up on our objectives and leave. Who cares about obtaining spoils when we won't live to enjoy them? Commander Lydia never hesitates to pull back if the situation turns shifty."

"I think those same criteria apply right now. Isn't everything that is happening to us dangerous?"

"We have no choice this time." Mayra sighed and lowered her eyes. "The treasures people believe is locked inside the Starlight Megalodon is invaluable to the backers of Lydia's Swordmaidens."

Ves noticed a subtle point in her words.

"You believe we won't find anything aboard the Starlight Megalodon?"

"Go figure." She shrugged. "How long has it been since she crashed on Seven? What did the surviving crew do? It would be pointless to keep anything useful inside the battleship. If I was in charge, I wouldn't hesitate to dismantle her into useful components that could be used to build a city. Perhaps the survivors actually did so. Don't you think the ancient cities look like they could have been made out of the hull of the battleship?"

Ves reluctantly shook his head. "I don't think so. We've scraped some samples of the alloy structures in Mulak and Samar, and their alloys are composed of mundane metals mined from the planet. We even dated them and everything and they're roughly three-thousand years old. Still, I don't think your sentiment is wrong. A CFA battleship of that time is as large as a city. There's no question that the survivors brought out equipment and valuables. However, according to our clues, several splits might have occurred among the survivors."

"Oh?" She raised her eyebrows. "What are your thoughts on the matter?"

"I think the survivors definitely disagreed on some matters. More than that, I can't say. All the ideas I've come up with is baseless speculation. Yet it's undeniable that the Starlight Megalodon still possesses some functionality. We all know what happened when the Caged and Red Tongs attempted to bombard the surface. Do you think that we'll still be welcome if we arrive at the battleship?"

This event still weighed heavily on the Flagrant Swordmaidens even after a long time had passed.

Mayra pursed her lips. "I can't say. What I do know is that there is at least someone on this planet who sent out FTL-capable shuttles to reveal their presence and draw us to this planet. It can't be the blessed people or the wildlings who led us to the Aeon Corona System."

The FTL-capable shuttles piloted by cloned individuals were cast out as bait for some reason. Like moths to the flame, the Flagrant Swordmaidens and a handful of other rivalling forces managed to win the competition over the keys that allowed them entry into this star system.

Yet why would anyone on this planet do so? To ask for rescue or a way out of this primitive planet? Or for something else? Ves still couldn't ascertain the motives of those who lured them all here.

#### **Chapter 849 Suitable for the Purpose**

Ves and Mayra chatted some more about the unusual circumstances of the planet. Eventually, they drew back to the original topic of the meeting.

"Have you figured out any way to shield our mechs and machines from the breakdown effect?"

Mayra frowned a bit. "I've poured a lot of time and effort into this very issue. Did you know what I learned?"

"What did you find out?" Ves asked.

"The mech models that I've personally designed are breaking down ever so slightly less. It's not only due to my mastery of their designs and my modifications. I've performed an extensive statistical analysis and there is an outside factor that can't be attributed to what I've mentioned before. The only mechs this protection applies to are my own mechs!"

Ves didn't doubt her words. A Journeyman Mech Designer wouldn't botch something as simple as a statistical analysis.

That caused him to think of the next step. If an outside factor existed that already protected some of the Swordmaiden mechs, could they leverage this influence?

He even already honed in on the fact that only her personally-developed models resisted the breakdown effect better.

Was it the X-Factor?!

Though Ves had seen the Devil Razor and the Silver Valencia in person and didn't perceive any special X-Factor, they still possessed a small advantage compared to generic mechs.

Mayra explicitly designed the Devil Razor and some other designs as the exclusive mechs of the Swordmaidens! Not only did she design them by herself, preventing others from polluting her vision for her mechs, they also inherited her affection for the Swordmaidens!

A labor of love differed dramatically and carried an entirely different meaning than a commercial product bought from the market or scavenged from the battlefield. The internal Swordmaiden mechs not only carried Mayra's affection, they were also well-loved products by the Swordmaiden mech pilots themselves.

Therefore, even if their X-Factor didn't amount to much compared to a mech designed by Ves, they possessed their own charm that gave them a tiny edge over other pirate outfits.

It may have been one of the reasons why Lydia's Swordmaidens managed to survive for so long.

Still, broaching this subject touched upon his own advantages. Though he respected Mayra immensely, it didn't mean he wanted to hand over priceless secrets for free.

So for now, Ves could only approach the issue from an indirect angle.

"Maybe the fact that you are the designer who is in close proximity to your designs is the difference."

Mayra frowned at Ves. "While that is a potentially logical argument, it's also poorly conceived. What difference does it make if I'm the designer?"

"Well, is there another answer that can explain it better?"

"The breakdown effect is caused by the spacetime distortions originating from the turbulence in the flow of higher-dimensional particles above our heads. Nothing about them is related to the fact that I'm in the vicinity of the mechs I've designed! Correlation does not necessarily imply causation!"

She basically stated that Ves was being nonsensical. It was like saying that someone was a genocidal murderer because he wore the same mustache as an infamous villain.

"Look, Mayra, just sit still for a moment and think. Can you come up with a better explanation than this?"

While Mayra already developed several possibilities, they sounded even less plausible. However, to accept the suggestion by Ves would force her to surrender to metaphysics.

Mech designers instinctively avoided metaphysical phenomena unless they aimed to harness them. In every other case, metaphysical phenomena only added to their burdens.

"Let's say your guess is correct." She said, not quite taking it seriously yet but contemplating the possibilities if it was true. "What do you want to do?"

"It's simple. We can design a new mech that's adapted to the environment!"

"Design a new mech?"

Ves came up with this idea as soon as he heard Mayra's observation. Wasn't this the best solution? Not only would they design a mech that would hopefully enjoy some spiritual protection, they could also make specific changes to their mechs that allowed them to fit the environment even better than their regular mechs.

"Think about it." Ves spoke. "Before we reached Aeon Corona VII, we heavily underestimated the difficulties we'd face. We only expected heavy gravity, but it turns out the surface is wracked with the breakdown effect as well. Most of our mechs will fare exceptionally poorly if they stray within a thousand kilometers of the crash site, and they can forget about functioning at all if they enter within a range of about a hundred kilometers. It's clear to me that pretty much our entire mech roster is too unsuited to the task of fighting close to the Starlight Megalodon."

"So your idea is to design a new mech that can conceivably operate within the vicinity of the battleship?" Mayra gave the suggestion a deep thought. "Even if the relationship you mentioned earlier didn't exist, it's still a viable idea to pursue. However, we'll be faced with severe restrictions. While it's not too difficult to design a mech in the field, it's very hard to fabricate them with our equipment and resources."

This was the biggest limitations they faced. Right now, they brought enough equipment and supplies to maintain and repair their mechs. It was a stretch to state they brought enough to fabricate new mechs.

While Ves acknowledged those limitations, he was already used to designing mechs under difficult conditions.

He grinned at Mayra. "I don't think those are serious disadvantages. Let's think about what kind of mech can best resist the breakdown effect. It has to be as mechanically robust and simple as possible! The best performing mech isn't necessarily the most complex one. Rather, the best mech is one that is extremely simple while retaining sufficient combat strength to deal with equivalent threats! There's no question to me that our rivals will eventually resort to the same solution as ours."

Mayra mused while she ran with the idea. "If the breakdown effect will grow as severe as we think it will reach, then our mech designs will have to be

dumbed down. There's also a question whether the entire mech needs to carry a gravitic backpack."

"You want to do away with the backpacks?"

"They're too large, unwieldy and mechanically complex. They're already a huge vulnerability for our regular mechs, but they will be prone to failure once they're carried within a hundred kilometer range of the Starlight Megalodon."

Ves tried to imagine a mech that had to resist both the breakdown effect and the crushing gravity. A dormant need within him to design a mech became stirred. He really missed this sensation!

Still, an important question popped up. "Since we're already discussing the possibility of designing a new mech, should we pool our abilities together and design a joint mech?"

If the two of them jointly designed a mech, they could potentially create a very strong mech for its intended purpose. Mayra may not be the kind of mech designer who flexed her design chops, but as a Journeyman Mech Designer she was both capable and practical.

While Ves still fell short in some areas, his theoretical foundation was just as good as hers, if not better. He also brought a very huge hidden benefit to the table with his ability to foster the X-Factor in any design he worked upon.

While a joint design may complicate its X-Factor, Ves did not think the final product would disappoint.

Unfortunately, Mayra shot the idea down.

"No." She immediately shook her head. "While it's helpful if we can combine our strong points and compensate for our weak points, it's not very tactful to develop a shared design. While we are still close allies, the proper separation has to be maintained."



Ves was a little disappointed that his ploy had failed to gain traction. He wanted to work alongside her in order to see what was special about Journeyman Mech Designers and what kind of advantages they possessed that justified their stature.

In the mech industry, only Journeyman Mech Designers and higher were considered real mech designers! Even if Ves had an inflated sense of self-worth, he keenly recognized that he still faced many limits as an Apprentice.

He wanted to advance so badly, but he was still a way off!

Still, Mayra had a point. Ves calmed down and accepted her logic.

"Okay. I'll have to discuss this with Captain Byrd, but I think I can gain her approval to design a completely new mech that can cope with the breakdown effect. However, even if we are designing separate mechs, what do you say about swapping some ideas? Designing a new mech is a lot easier if we can receive feedback from each other."

"I'm fine with that, as long as they don't touch upon the strategic points of our mechs. Let's keep it basic."

Ves and Mayra proceeded to brainstorm some ideas for their upcoming designs.

"First off, the mech has to be a quadruped." Marya stated. "A bipedal mech is inherently more unstable and can be knocked down or tipped over with sufficient force. It's not that easy for a mech to stand up once it falls. On the battlefield, a bipedal mech that takes minutes to climb up its feet will almost certainly be wrecked."

Ves agreed with her suggestion. "A two-legged mech is just begging to be knocked flat on its back. A six-legged mech has two more legs than necessary that weigh it down and waste more energy. A four-legged mech on the other

hand is exceptionally stable while still allowing for a light design. Do you think the weight class of the mech can be light or medium?"

"It's better for us to design a light mech. Many of the failures result from an enormous amount of force being pressed upon an improperly-aligned part. Light mechs are some of the least complex mechs and they don't put too much weight on the limbs."

"A light mech won't have much armor, though."

"A medium mech expends too much energy. Minimizing the mass of our mechs should be a top priority."

"That's going to be hard to accomplish with four legs. I can foresee that the mobility of our mech designs won't be anything impressive either."

"The designs don't have to be impressive. They have to be functional and suitable for the purpose."

This was the key. The mech had to be suitable for the purpose. This meant that even if the spec sheets of their designs were something to cry about, as long as they fulfilled their intended purpose, so what!

After a brief back-and-forth, Ves started to develop a vague vision for a potential breakdown-proof design.

It would be one of the worst mechs he'd ever designed. Due to the need to design a four-legged mech, Ves began to consider shaping his design in the form of a bestial mech.

In fact, Mayra already considered designing something like a tiger mech. Such a mech allowed the Swordmaidens to channel their ferocity in another way. Though it would be something of a glass cannon due to its weak armor and disappointing mobility, it could nonetheless tear apart any opponent that entered its range.

Meanwhile, Ves eventually rejected the option of designing a bestial mech as the Vandal mech pilots generally didn't possess the experience or capability to pilot such mechs. The same applied to the Swordmaidens, but they were practically elites among pirates, so they should be able to adjust to the form a lot faster than the average Vandal mech pilot.

Therefore, Ves began to develop a bold idea. Why not eschew the conventional humanoid and bestial shapes and follow an original path?

"A simple, four-legged mech doesn't necessarily have to look like a wolf, tiger, horse or anything else that runs on four legs. Why not simply it further and design a frontline mech?"

Of all the possible mech types in existence, the frontline mech was as simple as a mech designer could get! The more Ves contemplated the notion, the more he became enamoured by it. While he had never designed a frontline mech before, he occasionally dreamed of doing so.

#### **Chapter 850 Beating the Breakdown**

The idea to design a new mech that fit better with the environment than their existing mechs appealed to Ves very much. He restrained his design tendencies for so long while he worked with the Vandals that he'd almost forgotten his true purpose!

While the brief opportunities he gained in the past to design a competition mech satisfied his thirst for a bit, it was like a single drop of water in a vast desert. Now that he found a chance, he didn't intend to let go.

Previously, the Flagrant Vandals already possessed an abundant amount of suitable mechs for the jobs at hand. While they made use of fairly random Vesian mechs they stole from their raids, the Vandals weren't entirely stupid and they prioritized older but serviceable military-grade mechs.

None of the designs that Ves could come up with could outperform these optimized mechs, even if he incorporated military-grade component design schematics.

Ves was just a single mech designer, while most of the other military-grade mechs were often designed by design teams led by one or multiple Senior Mech Designers. Therefore, from the start, there was no point in offering the Vandals to design a mech that didn't add any value to their combat effectiveness.

The situation changed once they landed on Seven and entered the storm lands. With the breakdown effect wreaking greater havoc the closer they got to the source of the phenomenon, the Vandals faced the unpalatable prospect of restricting their mechs to the periphery.

Even up to this day, the Vandals and Swordmaidens seriously considered sending their warriors and soldiers to the battleship on foot!

While they knew that they needed to secure the interior of the Starlight Megalodon with foot soldiers, what about the exits? There was no point in sending them in only for some other force that managed to field their mechs to wait outside and capture any infantry force coming out with valuable loot.

The Flagrant Swordmaidens deeply worried about securing their exit lanes. The problem sounded similar to spaceborn fleets maintaining orbital supremacy so that their landbound forces had a way out after finishing their business on the ground.

"The power disparity between a mech and a soldier on foot is too huge. Even the worst mech in history can easily crush a soldier in combat armor."

Due to the increasing strength of the breakdown effect, the Flagrant Vandals already realized that their tough, strong and heavy suits of exoskeleton armor suffered the same fate as the mechs.

Powered fully by a raft of servos and artificial musculature, the exoskeleton armors possessed way too many moving parts. The more moving parts a machine possessed, the higher the chance of suffering a failure. Perhaps one minute an arm would lock up. That was fine, because the exoskeleton armor could still fight even without a functional arm.

It would be bad if one of the legs malfunctioned next. That would practically immobilize the suit that could easily rival or exceed the mass of a cow. This incredible mass also exacerbated the exoskeleton armor's needs as they all needed to wear heavy-duty gravitic backpacks that expended its energy reserves within hours. This ultimately limited their applications, as they simply didn't possess the necessary reach to venture deep within the Starlight Megalodon.

Just like with mechs, the simpler the combat armor, the longer it lasted. The Vandals and the Swordmaidens already adjusted to this mentality and their armorers began to fabricate a raft of light combat armor.

Yes, light combat armor, which was the weakest and lightest possible protective suit specialized for combat operations.

This was because medium combat armor depended on internal motors and servos, all of which basically consisted of lots of tiny parts that underwent a lot of strain from lifting all of the weight!

"Since the same logic that applies to combat armor is also valid to mechs, I don't see why we shouldn't consider this option."

Ves thought too simply. When he put the arguments forth in front of Captain Byrd, she frowned.

"While I'm not a mech designer or a chief technician, even I know that adding a new mech model to our lineup is a huge undertaking. It's one thing to fabricate new combat armor. They're small, simple and don't take too much

effort to mass-produce. It's an entirely different story when you're talking about something as large as mechs. Let me call in a specialist."

He waited as Captain Byrd called in Lieutenant Commander Soapstone. The logistics officer entered the meeting room aboard one of the heavy transports converted into a mobile headquarters.

"You called, captain?" She asked as she sent a curious glance towards Ves.

They hadn't interacted lately as they became preoccupied with their own issues. The ground expedition expended vast amounts of energy and supplies. Trying to make both of them last as long as possible tired her out continuously ever since she stepped foot on the ground.

"Please provide a judgement on Mr. Larkinson's proposal."

When Ves briefly summarized his plan to develop a breakdown-proof mech, Soapstone weighed the proposal seriously.

"What kind of materials are you looking to draw upon?" Soapstone asked.

"Nothing too fancy. I know our limitations. I'm not going for quality but simplicity. We won't be making use of the best alloys and exotics."

"That means your breakdown-proof mechs will inevitably be expendable. Is that a price that the Vandals are willing to pay?"

"The mechs will be weak regardless of what I do." Ves stated simply. "Putting too much bling on the mechs is like putting lipstick on a dog. Most of the expense will be put to waste. It's much better to keep them cheap and simple as that makes it easy for us to produce a decent amount of breakdown-proof mechs in a short amount of time. We can even find a nearby ore deposit to avoid drawing upon our diminishing resource stockpiles."

Ves made this consideration after much thought. He figured that Captain Byrd and Lieutenant Commander Soapstone would be more inclined to reject his

proposal if he insisted on designing an expensive mech that drew upon an excessive amount of expensive materials.

Everyone tended to favor cheaper options over more expensive options, especially in a time of scarcity. The Vandals had always paid an extreme amount of attention on their energy and resource expenditures and really wouldn't be pleased if Ves dumped a huge burden on their laps.

"It's doable, captain." Soapstone concluded. "If the mech is as simple and cheap as he claims, we won't have to make too many sacrifices to produce a squad of these breakdown-proof mechs. Is it possible to fabricate them on the move?"

"I can design them in a way that they can be assembled in a semi-modular fashion. This way, the mech technicians can first fabricate all of the individual parts separately that can easily be stored in containers until we have need of them. When we wish to deploy them, it will only take half a day of work for a single crew to assemble them into working condition."

Ves made his final pitch. "You can consider it as a contingency option, ma'am. I have experience with designing original mechs by myself, so I'm fully capable of taking on the design project by myself. Fabricating these mechs will take some effort but it won't draw too many mech technicians away from their regular duties because they can easily and quickly reproduce all of the parts. If the breakdown effect isn't as serious as we thought, we can simply keep the parts in storage or recycle them down to their base materials. Besides, the Swordmaidens aren't sitting still. They're already on the move."

Eventually, his arguments convinced Captain Byrd. "If you put it that way, it's worth a try. However, I don't want you pull away too many mech technicians from their regular duties. It's my understanding that they already have enough work on their hands. We can't afford to be delayed in our forward progress because our mechs take longer to be repaired."

"Good! I'll be sure to keep you apprised of my progress, captain. I think it will take roughly a month for me to design a breakdown-proof mech that's fit for our circumstances."

They began to discuss his choice for opting for a laser-armed frontline mech. Why go for a ranged mech instead of a melee mech?

"The simplest quadruped melee mechs are bestial mechs, and I don't have enough experience with their structure to design anything reliable. A frontline mech on the other hand is more like a humanoid mech with every redundant part stripped away. A ranged mech is much more mechanically simple than a melee mech that has to perform complicated movements to inflict damage."

Not to mention that Mayra already declared her intention to design a tiger-shaped melee mech. Allowing the Vandals to field ranged mechs neatly covered the weaknesses of the Swordmaiden bestial mechs and strengthened the synergy of their allied forces.

"Don't forget that we only have a limited pool of mech pilots to draw upon Mr. Larkinson. Any ranged mech pilot that we allocate to your breakdown-proof mechs is one less mech pilot in our main force. We both know that frontline mechs work best in greater numbers, but I'm not willing to weaken our main force."

"How many breakdown-proof mechs are you willing to support, ma'am?"

"We'll have to see once we arrive at the mission site. For now, let's assume that I want to have a squad of ten or twelve or so mechs."

According to their estimates, they were getting closer and closer to the Starlight Megalodon. It might take two to three months to finally get close enough to contest for control over the battleship.



This meant that Ves needed to have his new mechs ready by then. While this timeframe was rather tight considering their limited fabrication capabilities, Ves possessed enough confidence that he could finish the job in time.

"Leave it to me, captain."

Ves eventually left the meeting room and returned to the mobile workshop. He managed to obtain approval for his latest project, but only after he agreed to several provisions. They weren't anything unexpected. He was basically on his own during the design process and when it was time to fabricate his designs, he couldn't draw on more than two crews of mech technicians at a time.

"If I want to complete everything in time, I'll have to stick to my promises and keep my mech as cheap and mechanically simple as possible."

He considered this project a rare and valuable opportunity to showcase his design prowess after a long time of dormancy. Properly speaking, this design project amounted to developing his third formal original mech design!

Even though the plan was to only fabricate twelve of them at most, with very little possibility of using outside of this mission, it did not take away the fact that Ves had the opportunity to design a mech for the purpose of serving his clients.

In the case of the Blackbeak medium knight mechs and the Crystal Lord medium laser rifleman mechs, Ves explicitly designed those mech models for the market.

This time, his third original mech design exclusively served the Flagrant Vandals and no one else, but that did not take away the sanctity of the designer-client relationship. Whether a mech designer developed a mech for the market or for a specific client, they both served their core purpose of their profession.

Mayra was no less of a mech designer than those who ran multi-billion credit mech manufacturers in civilized space. While the pirate designer mainly designed mechs for the Swordmaidens and a couple of allied pirate gangs, her designs did not lose out too much to those who designed mechs meant for sale in the brutally competitive mech markets.

"Well, since this is my first formal design project in a very long while, I'll have to start from the beginning. What is my vision for my third original design?"